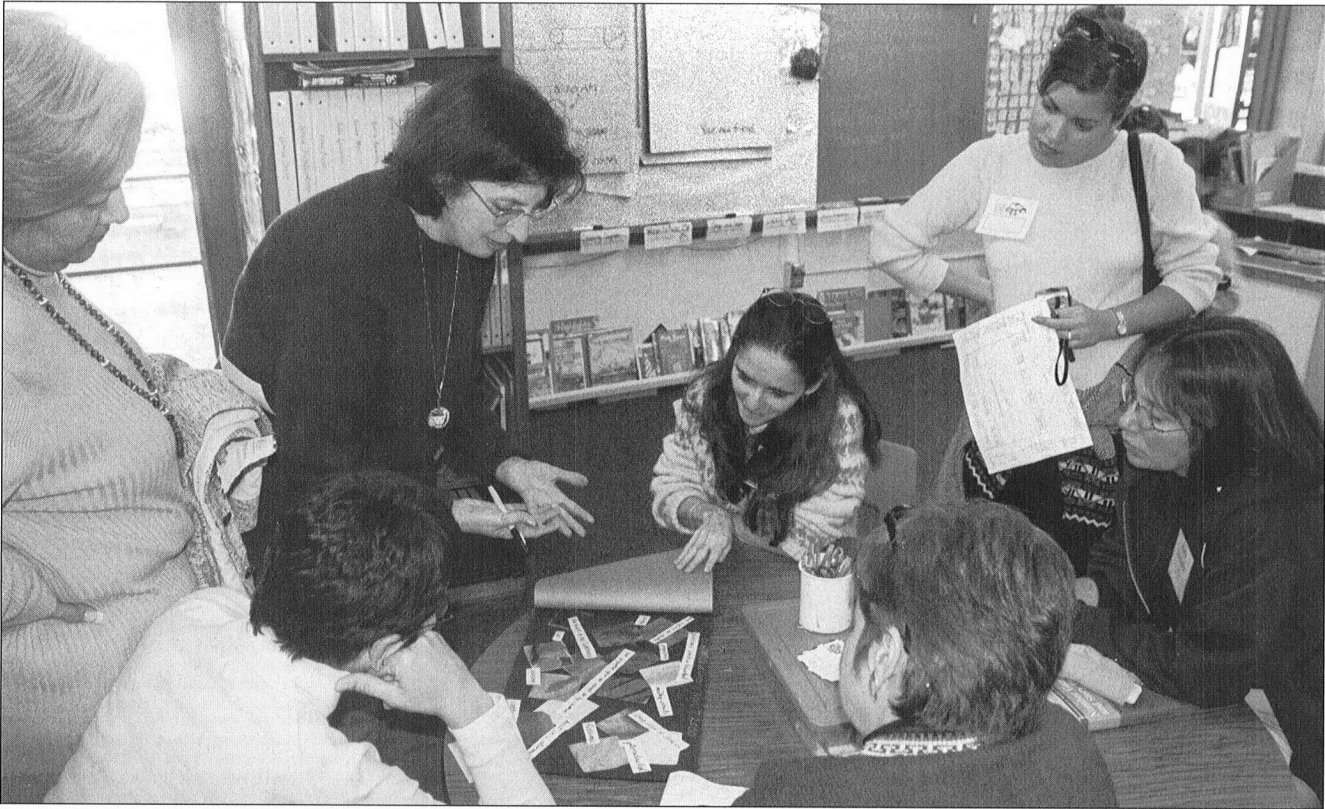


We've Got to Talk: Redefining Our Work with Families



Charlene Klassen-Endrizzi

Teachers and families create time and space for talking about literacy issues.



Patty: *Yesterday I corrected my husband. He was in the process of telling our daughter [Tonya] that she misspelled a word [on our family message board]. I was behind Tonya waving, "No, No, No. You're not supposed to correct her. She can just try to spell it and then circle it if she needs help." Then Tonya started giggling because she knew her dad got in trouble.*

The room full of mothers, fathers, and teachers chuckled as Patty recounted this experience at our November literacy evening. Over the past two years, this group of parents and teachers of 20 young struggling readers gathered monthly to discuss literacy issues of concern at home and school. Our opening ritual consisted of sharing stories about our struggles and successes. Teachers

usually posed a question to help focus this event. Patty's story constituted her response to the focus question, *What have you discovered about your child as a writer over the past month?* This family story evolved from the previous month when mothers and fathers were invited to use writing to communicate with their child using a magnetic message board

(Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). Teachers encouraged parents to focus on children's intentions as writers, not their errors. Diana, a second-grade teacher, explained how the desire of her two daughters to communicate helped her understand how writing and spelling develop over time (Graves, 1983):

Diana: *I'd like to tell you about how my children got me into writing. My children wrote before they read. I observed my kids scribbling at a very young age. When the kids made marks, it held meaning . . . My children watched Sesame Street and learned that letters made sounds. They realized that if they copied it, they could say something.*

Diana went on to talk about how she learned not to be overly concerned with temporary spelling; instead she focused on how her daughters worked to communicate with her. She invited parents to talk with their children through a family message board and to focus on ideas.

Patty's story the following month about her efforts to help her husband focus on meaning indicated a significant shift in her understanding of the writing process. Patty recognized her own pivotal role as a supporter of her daughter's writing efforts and discovered for herself that correcting every mistake often impeded the learning process; she wanted to help her husband understand this perspective as well.

These two stories from family literacy evenings demonstrate a unique type of talk between parents and teachers. Talk is an essential and often overlooked aspect of learning (Barnes, 1976). As we talk with others who listen and pose thoughtful questions, we learn. Fostering an atmosphere where people work to accept ideas and reflect on current understandings occurs slowly over

time (Pierce & Gilles, 1993). Along with five other teachers, Diana and I were studying how to collaboratively learn with families. We wanted to explore how to build a literacy partnership with our students' first learning partners that valued their home-learning experiences. Finding time to talk with families was essential to our learning.

This type of talk between families and teachers did not just magically happen. It took an intense focus and willingness to be open to another perspective. Discussions between families and teachers are part of a growing field of study where teachers work to build connections with their students' first learning partners (Oglan, 1997; Shockley, Michalove,

**Teachers encouraged
parents to focus
on children's
intentions as writers,
not their errors.**

& Allen, 1995; Swap, 1993). Traditionally teachers and families do not see each other as valuable learning partners. Yet these 20 parents and teachers discovered the value of listening and learning from each other to create a powerful support network for their children.

THREE PARADIGMS OF HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

My view of home-school partnerships has slowly evolved over time. As a new fourth-grade teacher in the early 1980s, I dreaded talking with parents. Uncertain of my role, I did not want family members interfering with my work at school. My first orientation towards parent interactions—Avoid Talking to Parents—could be characterized as

a separation between home and school. Freire's (1970) banking model of education aptly defined my role as one of depositing information available for convenient retrieval at a later date; the parents became passive receivers of facts I disseminated through district handbooks and classroom notices. I focused on controlling parent interactions just as I felt controlled by others (e.g., administrators, state departments of education, publishers). Adopting a common teacher mind-set, I focused on identifying the deficiencies in a student's home life; I believed my students lacked essential experiences that I needed to provide, which in turn created further distance between myself and parents (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). To maintain the status quo, I kept talk to a minimum.

By my fifth year of teaching intermediate grades, I had grown more comfortable communicating with parents and started inviting them to help in our classroom. Students' family members came to school for various purposes, such as publishing student books to celebrate children's authorship. I remained the key decision maker but parental support enhanced learning experiences. This second orientation—Talking at Parents—could be characterized as a program (Swap, 1993) that supports the teacher's model of learning. I assigned parents specific jobs, such as listening to children read one-on-one or managing learning centers. I suggested specific learning activities to be completed at home (e.g., read with your child every night for 15 minutes) since I believed teacher-directed experiences could reinforce concepts introduced at school. Parental visibility in the school heightened community rapport

as family members assumed more responsibilities.

The label used to define this second orientation towards home-school partnerships outlines a central problem with the communication style—teachers talking at parents. When I set out to present ideas for family members, I created a hierarchical system. Barnes's (1976) notion of presentational talk helps to identify concerns within this traditional relationship. Presentational talk, focused on transmitting knowledge for others to acquire, establishes clear guidelines for interactions. A more knowledgeable person (the teacher) imparts information to a passive listener (the parent). The lack of equity and trust within this relationship fosters simple replica-

A critical look at the 14% of time I managed each week nudged me to move beyond the boundaries that separated learning at home and school and to explore ways to understand, value, and build on current home literacy practices.

I have spent the last four years working with classroom teachers to explore ways of developing a partnership with families for the purpose of building a supportive learning environment that transcends traditional home-school borders. Talking with family members, as seen in the opening vignette where Patty and Diana shared stories at a family literacy evening, creates a context for teachers and parents to discuss key learning issues relevant to their

Home-school partnerships, when seen as occasions for teachers and families to "learn deliberately," become a vehicle for transforming relationships.

tion of activities, not ownership or new understanding. Additionally, teachers fail to ask families to share how they already use literacy at home and in their community. Educating and transmitting knowledge to parents are the goals, not valuing, supporting, and building on existing literacy practices.

I felt uncertain about sharing control of the learning process with parents. The impetus for my change came from the realization that classroom teachers only have 14% of a student's time in a given year. Six and a half hours at school five days a week leaves 35% of their time for sleep and the other 49% of their evening, weekend, and vacation hours to spend with parents, siblings, friends, child-care providers, coaches, and various community members (Perkins & Kazanjy, 1996).

children. This third orientation towards home-school interactions—Talking, Listening, and Learning with Parents—could be characterized as a partnership (Swap, 1993; Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995) where mutual respect is an essential building block of the family-teacher relationship.

Home-school partnerships, when seen as occasions for teachers and families to "learn deliberately," become a vehicle for transforming relationships. When teachers respect a child's years of learning outside their classroom, they begin each September intent on building bridges that unite home, community, and school experiences. Parents are valued as a child's first and most influential learning partner, and teachers demonstrate to family members their desire to join an es-

tablished learning partnership for nine months (Hill, 1989). Funds of knowledge from a child's family, peer, sports, religious, and community life provide a wealth of resources to utilize in the learning process (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Additionally, teachers recognize that learning evolves in numerous contexts outside the classroom, and they use the child's family and community life to inform the curriculum (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Table 1 summarizes these three views of home-school partnerships.

A primary distinction that defines and separates these three orientations is the way people use talk to communicate. In studying my current work with families and teachers, I find Barnes's (1976) label of exploratory talk particularly useful. Exploratory talk, focused on sharing within a supportive community, requires a willingness to consider another viewpoint. Fostering an atmosphere where people work to accept, clarify, question, and reflect on ideas and concerns is a primary goal. Three different types of exploratory talk—conversation, story, and dialogue, each with a distinct purpose—invite community members to learn to trust each other, become connected, and explore new ideas (Henson, 1993). As I reflected on my four years of inquiry with teachers and parents, I searched for these three forms of talk to study how each one helped to redefine home-school partnerships. This talk allowed teachers to enlarge their community of learners by inviting parents into explorative literacy discussions.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The parent-teacher interactions occurred in two school settings in rural, western Pennsylvania. The population of both schools typified

working and middle-class America. Parent professions ranged from hairdressers to steel mill workers, farmers, office managers, school janitors, and stay-at-home moms. Families' backgrounds represented various European American ethnic groups including Polish, Italian, Ukrainian, and Slavic. Thirty percent of the children participated in the Title 1 program; 25% percent qualified for free or reduced lunch. The names of the children and parents are all pseudonyms.

In one of the school settings, Karen (a second-grade teacher) and I spent

a year working with her 22 students and families. We received limited financial support through my college's faculty research fund. Our initial goal of exploring reading strategies expanded to include a study about literacy learning at home and at school.

In the other school setting, a group of six teachers (Sherry, Pat, Kelly, Diana, Mary-Kay, Tamila) and I spent three years building stronger partnerships with a group of 20 primary students and their families. Funding came from a Read to Succeed state literacy grant (Pennsylvania Depart-

ment of Education, 1999). To adhere to the grant's requirements, these teachers selected 20 children in kindergarten through second grade who struggled within their regular classroom reading program and did not score well on district and state reading achievement tests. Children attended weekly after-school sessions where teachers provided intensive support through constructivist literacy experiences (Weaver, 1994). Classroom release time every other month for two years enabled us to create a teacher study group (Birchak et al., 1998) where we exam-

HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

ORIENTATION	AVOID TALKING TO PARENTS	TALKING AT PARENTS	TALKING, LISTENING & LEARNING WITH PARENTS
<i>Role of parent</i>	*Passive receiver of information from school *Lack of interest resulting from parent's instructional histories	*Passive supporter of school's decisions *Expresses an interest in working with school and in child's classroom	*Child's 1st learning partner, active co-learner with teacher *Supports and develops policies with teacher
<i>Role of teacher</i>	*Disseminates information *Interacts only when required *Teacher as technician	*Solicits support from parents *Teacher as organizer	*Invites families into classroom to create a partnership *Teacher as listener and mediator
<i>View of Learning</i>	*Curriculum as fact	*Curriculum as activity	*Curriculum as inquiry
<i>Learning Opportunities</i>	*Open house *Parent conferences	*Classroom volunteer *Attends classroom & school programs	*Family-teacher literacy gatherings *Home surveys *Newsletters
<i>Decisions</i>	*Made by outsiders (e.g., administrators)	*Made by teacher	*Made jointly by teacher and parent
<i>Forms of talk</i>	*Authoritative	*Presentational	*Exploratory—conversation, story, & dialogue
<i>Resources available</i>	*School knowledge	*School knowledge	*Funds of knowledge from home, school, & community
<i>Responsibility for learning</i>	*School responsible for educating child	*Teacher with some parental support	*Parent, teacher, and student share responsibility
<i>Characterized as</i>	*A separation between home and school	*A program supporting teacher	*A partnership built on mutual respect

Table 1. Three paradigms of home-school partnerships

ined our literacy practices and parent partnerships. My primary goal was to create a time and space for talking about literacy issues with families and teachers.

INITIATING THE CONVERSATION

Time devoted to unstructured conversation is not wasted because of the bonding that occurs when people converse with each other (Henson, 1993, p. 46).

Parents' voices are not often valued in classrooms today, but Karen and I began the school year by signaling our intent to learn from families. On the first day of school, Karen sent home a questionnaire asking parents to tell us about their child (Calkins, 1991). In a brief explanatory note attached to this questionnaire, she stated: *Communication with parents about their child will help me to know the children better and plan instruction more effectively.* One question asked families to describe reading/writing events they observed at home. Parents' responses included:

Janice: *Before Bruce was able to go in the pool, he had to read a book aloud to someone. He reads road signs. Bruce also plays "Reader Rabbit" on the computer, enhancing his reading skills. He played "school" this summer with workbook sheets.*

Tonya: *Shannon's Dad had custody of her for the summer. Shannon wrote me a letter and mailed it to me this summer. It was put on the refrigerator for months. [She did] a wonderful job.*

These revelations from parents indicated their awareness of traditional and purposeful literacy experiences outside of school. As expected, family members saw value in Dick and Jane basal reading experiences, much like their own schooling experiences years ago (Klassen-Endrizzi, 2000). Yet moms and dads

shared vignettes of diverse reading and writing events, ranging from teacher-directed activities (workbooks) to the usefulness of literacy

However, it is easier to send home a survey than organize an evening meeting with teachers and families. Conversations are, by their very

Teachers began to value the literate ways of their students' families as they saw examples of functional literacy throughout home life.

in everyday life (reading road signs and writing letters). Instead of taking months to get to know these learners and their families, we were already conscious of their literate lives at home by the end of the first week of school.

In my work with the second group of teachers, we asked parents to complete a similar home survey but extended this notion by inviting parents to join us in conducting a writing dig. During the September family literacy evening, we explained our belief that writing is everywhere in our lives and asked parents to bring samples of how their families use writing every day (Whitmore & Norton-Meier, 2000). In small groups at our next evening meeting, we set out to categorize the piles of thank-you notes, e-mail messages, soccer schedules, recipes, and grocery lists. We identified various purposes for writing related to family and friends, sports, health, and work. We hung huge charts displaying our writing artifacts in the hallway for others in the school to see. Both teachers and families were reminded of the productive nature of writing throughout our lives outside of school.

Both of these conversational experiences with families at the two different schools created a bond between the teachers and parents. While the written conversation through the questionnaire informed Karen and me, the oral conversation between families and teachers through the writing dig enlightened everyone.

nature, meant to be open-ended exchanges where no single right answer is required. Examining these two conversations indicates that teachers began to value the literate ways of their students' families as they saw examples of functional literacy throughout home life. We cannot know our students fully until we inquire about their lives beyond the six-and-a-half hours they spend with us. When teachers send the signal—*I want to understand you in order to make more knowledgeable decisions for your child*—parents are often surprised. At first, many parents are intimidated by schools, which they see as a separate, closed entity based on their own prior schooling. It takes a concerted effort by teachers to overcome this traditional orientation. Conversations that open up the lines of communication create an important starting point upon which to build.

REVEALING STORIES

Stories [are] the tales that we tell ourselves that let people know who we really are . . . By telling stories and by listening to stories, people begin to feel connected to each other . . . Deep bonds are formed when stories are told (Henson, 1993, p. 47).

Sherry, Pat, Kelly, Diana, Mary-Kay, Tamila, and I purposefully orchestrated experiences that enabled families and teachers to share their personal lives. One event we used to open each monthly literacy evening was posing a question based on

parents' current concerns and inviting everyone to respond. The family story Patty shared was an example of a mother revealing her learning process. During this storytelling event, other mothers and fathers shared equally revealing stories connected to their use of a family message board:

Roni: *Adam leaves his dad notes [on the message board] when he works at night.*

Beverly: *Yesterday evening I found Ethan lying on his bed writing and copying. I asked him what he was doing and he stated, "I have to keep track of friends and phone numbers."*

Dan: *Joshua sometimes asks me to print out a word on the computer. Now I realize that when I print this word, it ends up in the message board.*

These moms and dads uncovered varied reasons for writing at home. Adam's mom saw the importance of her son wanting to connect with his dad even when he was away at work; Ethan's mother realized the value her son found in keeping personal records; Joshua's dad considered his son's desire to move toward conventional spelling. Each story helped others increase their understanding of numerous personal and social functions of writing.

On more than one occasion during our storytelling openings, I recall glancing at my watch and thinking about how we would not complete all of the other agenda items for the evening as the storytelling usually extended well beyond our time allotment. In hindsight, I can see the value in hearing all voices present. Each home was honored as our community actively listened to family tales. Stories became a way of welcoming families into our evening discussions. The simplicity

of hearing stories focused our attention, put people at ease, and honored each family.

In the other school setting, Karen and I discovered the richness of sharing stories in small-group discussions as well. When parents met in small groups to discuss a parent literacy book, they naturally broke into storytelling mode to explain how they agreed or disagreed with the author. At our second gathering, when parents discussed several chapters from *Home: Where Reading and Writing Begin* (Hill, 1989), one mother substantiated the author's idea of creating purposeful literacy opportunities at home by sharing how she asked her son, Sean, to complete the Nielsen television rating questionnaire they received in the mail that week. These

**Taking risks
by revealing life
stories evoked a
collaborative spirit.**

small-group discussions involving the retelling of experiences from home once again revealed to us the literacy connections parents were making.

Across both school settings, I can now see how storytelling dignified the lives of students and their families and contributed to a sense of belonging (Peterson, 1992). In small- or large-group discussions, assuming the role of storyteller enabled community members to make sense of their lives and present new insights to others. In the role of listener, teachers and parents valued others as they listened intently to family experiences. Sharing stories differed from conversation and revealed something more personal and intimate about each home.

The power of story to form a community also honors individual voices. We chose to move beyond the role of teacher as the singular, privileged storyteller by continually issuing invitations for families to share their stories. Rosen (1984) noted, "If the culture of the community is to enter the culture of the school, its stories must come too" (p. 27). Our home-school learning communities used stories as a central way of adding another dimension to the learning process. Taking risks by revealing life stories evoked a collaborative spirit.

ENTERING INTO DIALOGUE

Dialogue is different from mere talk; [it] involves looking critically at authentic problems from multiple points of view . . . [It] is only by working together that people can solve the problems they face (Henson, 1993, p. 51).

Conversation and story were the most common forms of talk heard between teachers and parents. Seldom did our talk evolve beyond these forms to dialogue. Yet talk that invites a critical exploration of issues from diverse perspectives is a useful problem-solving tool (Barnes, 1976). Dialogue offers new potential for building community. In the midst of hundreds of conversations and storytelling events with families, there were a few dialogic exchanges. The following glimpse of dialogue mingled with conversation and story offered a different learning opportunity as people came together to problem-pose and problem-solve (Freire, 1970).

A new parent to our group, Molly, shared with one of the teachers about what she learned by talking with another mother, Debbie. We invited her to share these discoveries with everyone at our next meet-

Learning Engagements in Family Literacy Evenings

These four practices served as the common experiences for family literacy evenings and were key to building home-school partnerships:

- **Responding to a Common Question**
The meeting opened with everyone orally responding to a question that was posted on chart paper (e.g., What have you learned about writing from your child over the past month?). The question connected to the discussion from the previous month's meeting.
- **Analyzing Home Literacy Artifacts**
Families and teachers discussed or shared literacy artifacts from the home related to the focus of the meeting (e.g., literacy dig of how to use writing in everyday life).
- **Creating Curriculum from Parents' Questions**
The focus of each meeting was developed around significant literacy questions that parents had raised in previous meetings. The discussions of these questions were usually organized in a particular format:
 - o Introduce the concern or give a brief presentation to provide information
 - o Small-group discussions of the concern
 - o Whole-group reflection and sharing from small groups
 - o Invitation for families to continue examining the issue over the next month with their child
- **Promoting Parents as Valued Resources**
Families were continuously invited to share key learning experiences from their lives and family interactions with other families at meetings. Teachers listened for stories in small groups and informal interactions that they could ask a parent to share with the entire group.

—Charlene Klassen-Endrizzi

ing. Molly described how she was learning not to get so upset when her son hesitated while reading aloud. She told how she used to tap or point at all the hard words her son Joey struggled with when he became uncertain during oral reading, a habit she learned in school years ago. She reconsidered this lifelong practice as she listened to Debbie talk during one of our small-group discussions one evening about the usefulness of simply listening, not tapping or pointing, as her son read aloud. As

Debbie explained how some miscues did not change the meaning of the sentence or story (Goodman, 1973), Molly wondered how her role as a listener might help her son, who truly feared reading events. When she decided to sit on her hands and work at listening instead, she discovered that the less she tapped at the words, the better her son read. Molly's dialogue with another parent enabled her to focus on creating a supportive literacy environment for her son.

During our first year, parents repeatedly raised the question, "What should I do when my child makes reading mistakes?" and so our parent-teacher group studied young readers' miscues. In our second year, when Molly joined the group, we did not directly explore the need to understand and value a child's reading "errors." Debbie had already made some major shifts in how she interacted with her son at home as a result of our discussions, and later used these new insights to help another mother reconsider her struggles with her son. Problem-posing with another parent appeared to be less threatening for Molly than talking with a teacher. We realized the need to provide more opportunities for parents to become resources for each other. We were discovering the power of teachers as mediators (Vygotsky, 1978) who create contexts for parents to become problem-posers and problem-solvers themselves.

Soon we discovered that Molly's sharing highlighted the significant stress experienced during reading events at home for many families. Mothers and fathers shared stories of how a lack of confidence in one area (reading) impacted the whole child. Brainstorming ways to alleviate stress during reading events with other parents enabled mothers and fathers to realize they were not alone in facing this issue.

Some of our tentative answers for building more confidence included not correcting so much when reading orally, allowing the child to pick the book, waiting for a good time to read, and varying the reading material (e.g., comics, baseball cards, hymnals, menus, road maps, board games). We continued to examine this issue periodically as parents discussed the stress they and their child experienced during reading events at home. It became apparent that

solving a dilemma created over several years of reading at home and school was not an easy task; problem solving became an ongoing process.

This example of dialogue mingled with conversation and story highlighted the tentative nature of problem solving. Posing problems did not lead to easy solutions; posing problems for group consideration led to bigger, more complex struggles (Freire, 1970). Yet that was the nature of learning. New insights gained by teachers and families intent on learning with children led to more complex questions. We realized our goal of literacy learning needed to shift from simply finding solutions to viewing learning as an ongoing process—best served within a supportive community where teachers and parents entered into dialogue and found the energy to keep working. Parents expressed how they found comfort in knowing others were facing similar issues.

The intensity of dialogue made this talk different from initiating conversations and sharing stories. Considering the tension expressed during these dialogic exchanges, it is no wonder there were few examples of this form of talk in our three-year study. As humans, we often work to avoid tension in our lives. Families and teachers willing to explore tensions publicly revealed a steadfast learning community engaged in the difficult work of becoming more proficient literacy partners.

STRESS POINTS

In sharing these examples of how teachers used conversations, stories, and dialogue to connect with their students' first learning partners, I would be remiss if I did not point out some of the obstacles we encountered. Both teachers and family

members faced a good deal of uncertainty as we ventured into unknown territory.

The largest hindrance was finding the time and energy to engage in these discussions. Families already very active in sports, religious, and community life had to find another slice of time for this partnership. Many mothers and fathers overcame their own negative instructional histories and discovered that schools were not closed, isolated communities. Across both school settings an average of 70% of the parents chose to actively build a partnership with their child's teacher in various

The largest hindrance was finding the time and energy to engage in these discussions.

ways; 30% of the parents were reluctant and participated to a lesser extent in spite of numerous invitations. We continue to examine ways of inviting all families to become our learning partners.

In the midst of significant district, state, and national curricular mandates, these teachers found time to add a crucial element to their classroom life. At times, each of them faced questions from colleagues who wondered why they devoted so much time to these partnerships. After a long day of teaching, they returned to school one night a month to talk with parents during our family evenings. To alleviate the intense work load, the six teachers at the second school agreed that we needed to cut back on the number of family evenings; during our second year, we held only six meetings; our third year, we held five family evenings.

Teachers needed moral support as they took huge risks by talking

with parents. They were used to talking *at* parents, but were not sure how to go about listening and learning with parents. The hours Karen and I logged on the phone enabled us to move forward in our partnership; the strong network of six teachers at the second school setting developed into a safe haven for dealing with district, grant, and administrative issues. Our teacher study-group time provided vital reflection opportunities to make sense of our discoveries and examine new questions.

Striving to embrace their nine-month residency in a family's life, these teachers chose to deal with numerous obstacles. I marvel at their ardent desire to enter into ongoing discussions with their students' first literacy partners. They continually chose to build a partnership by making personal sacrifices and solving managerial issues.

CONSIDERING NEW POTENTIAL

Looking back on these four years of learning alongside Karen, Sherry, Pat, Kelly, Diana, Mary-Kay, Tamila and over 40 families, I understand more clearly the need for each form of talk that built and sustained our learning communities in distinct ways. Each conversational, story-telling, and dialogic opportunity wove these families and teachers more tightly together. No single form of exploratory talk was more important than the other forms; all three became vital building blocks.

Our conversations were a vital beginning point for teachers and families. Teachers made shifts in the way they viewed literacy learning beyond their classrooms as they saw evidence of purposeful literacy events woven throughout families' lives. Parents heard for perhaps the first time how teachers valued their years of learning with their child.

Creating Space for Talk and Dialogue—Douglas Barnes

Research in the United Kingdom during the 1960s and '70s brought increased recognition to the role of talk in learning through the work of several scholars, including Douglas Barnes. Barnes was one of the first researchers to use detailed classroom observation and the transcribed talk of children engaged in normal classroom activities to explore the role of talk in learning. Barnes distinguished between two styles of classroom discourse. "Exploratory" talk describes the talk students engage in when they talk their way into ideas. This talk is often marked by incomplete ideas and interruptions, yet helps students make sense of emerging ideas. "Presentational" talk, in contrast, provides an officially approved answer. This talk is polished, made up of complete thoughts, and offers logical conclusions. Barnes found that presentational talk dominates most classrooms even though this type of talk does not provide students with the opportunity to make new thinking their own.

Works by or Influenced by Douglas Barnes

Barnes, D., Britton, J., & Rosen, H. (1971). *Language, the Learner, and the School*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- In this classic survey of secondary classrooms, Barnes found little or no exploratory talk during formal lessons in the humanities and in science.

Teachers did most of the talking, while students were cast in a passive role.

Barnes, D. (1976). *From Communication to Curriculum* (1st ed.) Harmondsworth: Penguin. (The second edition is available through Heinemann).

- Barnes analyzed relatively unstructured peer conversations and found students more frequently used exploratory talk in their discussions of science, history, and poetry. Barnes and other "oracy as communication" scholars advocated for small-group discussions without the teacher as a way to avoid the constraints placed on talk and learning in teacher-led discussions.

Pierce, K. M., & Gilles, C. (Eds.). (1993). *Cycles of Meaning: Exploring the Potential of Talk in Learning Communities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- This collection of teacher research studies grew out of a study group's explorations of how talk influences classroom experiences. Through reading Barnes's studies, consulting with him personally, and carrying out close observations and reflections on their own and their students' talk, these teachers provide clear examples of how talk enabled students to create new concepts.

—Karen Smith

Storytelling created a context for teachers to signal their willingness to listen. Family life was dignified as intent listeners honored each voice. Building on a foundation of conversations and stories, mothers, fathers, and teachers took risks in expressing questions that revealed their own struggles. Through dialogue, parents and teachers affirmed and reconsidered their current views of literacy learning in the midst of a supportive community. Teachers and parents took on a mediator role, supporting others as they examined literacy concerns. Solutions that led to broader issues enabled teachers

to see the complexities and ever-changing literacy needs of each family and child.

These seven teachers and their students' families provided a remarkable demonstration of a sustained effort to understand each other's unique home and school culture. They logged hours together building a powerful partnership. A key element in this relationship was the exploratory talk mothers, fathers, and teachers used to create a collective zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) as they co-constructed knowledge useful for their own

purposes. Talk time created a space for considering how to enact new learning strategies. Conversation surrounding our literacy dig helped everyone begin to re-value literacy learning at home as we studied artifacts. Patty's story of how she nudged her husband to value temporary spelling on their family message board encouraged others to take similar risks. Molly's and Debbie's dialogue enabled Molly to move beyond her current struggles. By recounting this learning experience to our whole parent group, she encouraged

others to reconsider their current views as well.

From the hundreds of learning events I examined over four years, these specific examples emerged as they highlighted the central need for a mediator, a more knowledgeable person who provided essential support and encouragement at pivotal learning moments (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers and parents acted as mediators for others who raised questions and concerns. Growth became possible as mothers, fathers, and teachers offered support in taking new risks. As we conversed, shared stories, and entered into dialogue, we came to understand literacy more fully. Parents were then able to mediate literacy events at home in more meaningful ways as they came to understand teachers' literacy beliefs and their child's literate actions more clearly. Likewise, teachers became able to mediate literacy events at school in a more meaningful way as they came to understand each student's literate ways at home.

Just as Vygotsky (1978) found young children using language to consider new possibilities, I now see how parents and teachers used exploratory talk to examine possible shifts or risks. Parents alongside other parents, as well as teachers alongside parents, became resources and offered their funds of knowledge to encourage others' growth process. Interdependent learning between families and teachers valued the knowledge and unique perspective each entity brought to learning experiences (Moll & Whittlemore, 1993).

It is risky to redefine the way we talk, listen, and learn with our students' primary learning partners. Yet we understand their children more fully as learners the more we talk with parents. When teachers listen

and learn from families, they make more informed decisions on behalf of children (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995).

Teachers' lives are filled with risk as they strive to withstand the bureaucratic take-over of schools today (McQuillan, 1998; Ohanian, 1999). The current standards and testing mania evolves partially from a public who does not understand the work of educators today. Teachers have a responsibility to start talking with the public by inviting families into discussions about learning. Parents are vital constituents many teachers overlook. We can ill afford not to find the time and space to invite families into our learning community. They become our strongest advocates as they understand more deeply our literacy practices while we work to understand and value their home literacy lives more completely.

Knowledgeable mothers and fathers offer a diverse perspective on the current push towards adding more systematic phonics instruction into primary classrooms (Garan, 2003). A parent from Karen's classroom shared his very different vision of literacy when we reflected on our learning at the end of our year-long study.

Steve: *Reading . . . is an activity where individual thoughts are pooled and shared . . . Jessie reads for content, not perfection. Now when she and I read together, my ears are open and my mouth is shut.*

Reading as an activity where "thoughts are pooled and shared" offers a stark contrast to rigid phonics-based methods being proposed at a national level (Bush, 2001). The pooling and sharing of thoughts is also an apt metaphor for our parent-teacher partnerships

built on mutual respect. As these seven teachers talked and listened to parents, they saw the need for stronger partnerships.

This father's insights into literacy learning transformed reading events at home for his daughter and himself. Imagine what our literacy curriculum at school could look like if other teachers made similar, profound shifts based on insights gained by talking with families. Let's start talking!

References

- Barnes, D. (1976). *From communication to curriculum*. Middlesex, England: Penguin.
- Birchak, B., Connor, C., Crawford, K. M., Kahn, L. H., Kaser, S., Turner, S., & Short, K. G. (1998). *The literacy crisis: False claims, real solutions*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bush, G. W. (2001). *No child left behind*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.
- Calkins, L., with Harwayne, S. (1991). *Living between the lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Garan, E. M. (2003). *Resisting reading mandates*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Goodman, K. S. (1973). Miscue: Window on the reading process. In K. S. Goodman (Ed.), *Miscue analysis: Applications to reading instruction* (pp. 3-14). Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Council of Teachers of English.
- Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harste, J. C., Woodward, V. A., & Burke, C. L. (1984). *Language stories and literacy lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Henson, J. (1993). The tie that binds: The role of talk in defining community. In K. M. Pierce & C. J. Gilles (Eds.), *Cycles of meaning: Exploring the potential of talk in learning communities* (pp. 37-58). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Hill, M. W. (1989). *Home: Where reading and writing begin*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Klassen-Endrizzi, C. (2000). Exploring our literacy beliefs with families. *Language Arts*, 78, 62-70.
- McQuillan, J. (1998). *The literacy crisis: False claims, real solutions*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31, 132-141.
- Moll, L. C., & Whitmore, K. F. (1993). Vygotsky in classroom practice: Moving from individual transmission to social transaction. In E. A. Foreman, N. Minick, & C. A. Stone (Eds.), *Contexts for learning: Socio-cultural dynamics in children's development* (pp. 19-42). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ogden, G. R. (1997). *Parents, learning, and whole language classrooms*. Urbana, IL: The National Council of Teachers of English.
- Ohanian, S. (1999). *One size fits few: The folly of educational standards*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Pennsylvania Department of Education, Division of Arts, Sciences, Communications, and Mathematics (Harrisburg). (1999). *Read to Succeed grant*. (Available from www.pde.psu.edu).
- Perkins, P., & Kazanjy, C. (1996, November). *Parents: Our students' first teachers*. Paper presented at the 86th annual conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago, IL.
- Peterson, R. (1992). *Life in a crowded place: Making a learning community*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Pierce, K. M., & Gilles, C. J. (1993). Preface. In K. M. Pierce & C. J. Gilles (Eds.), *Cycles of meaning: Exploring the potential of talk in learning communities* (vii-x). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rosen, H. (1984). *Stories and meaning*. London: National Association for the Teaching of English.
- Shockley, B., Michalove, B., & Allen, J. (1995). *Engaging families: Connecting home and school literacy communities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Short, K. G., & Harste, J. C., with Burke, C. (1996). *Creating classrooms for authors and inquirers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Swap, S. M. (1993). *Developing home-school partnerships: From concept to practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Taylor, D., & Dorsey-Gaines, C. (1988). *Growing up literate: Learning from inner-city families*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weaver, C. (1994). *Reading process and practice: From socio-psycholinguistic to whole language* (2nd ed). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Whitmore, K., & Norton-Meier, L. A. (2000). Welcome to p.kti. *Primary Voices K-6*, 8(3), 3-11.

Author Biography

Charlene Klassen-Endrizzi is associate professor in the Department of Education at Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. She previously taught intermediate students in Oroquieta and Fresno, California for 10 years.